

BOOKS
AND
BONE
VICTORIA CORVA

First published in 2019 by Witch Key Fiction
Copyright © 2019 Victoria Corva

All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used
in any manner whatsoever without the express written
permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations
in a book review.

*All characters and events in this publication are fictitious and any
resemblance to any real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

ISBN: 978-1-9161009-0-9

Victoria Corva

Website: <https://victoriacorva.xyz>

Witch Key Fiction

Website: <https://witchkeyfiction.xyz>

Cover art by Anna Pazyniuk (AnnDR)

Website: <https://www.deviantart.com/anndr/gallery/>

Many thanks to the supporters of the
BOOKS & BONE Kickstarter campaign.

Joh – for saying ‘why not necromancers?’

CONTENTS

1	The Boy in the Crypt	2
2	The Town Healers	18
3	Strong-willed Indeed	29
4	Late Returns	37
5	Stitchwork Monster	55
6	Astaravinarad	69
7	Convalescent Conversationalist	79
8	Spectre-punched	92
9	The Bone and Brew	99
10	It Takes a Village	110
11	Cast Out and Cursed At	123
12	The Craft	140
13	More Curse Than Craft	151
14	The Lure of Power	163
15	An Encounter	170
16	The Gods Wait	178
17	500 Years Late to the Funeral	190
18	Secrets and Spellwork	202
19	Risky Research	212
20	The Library of the Lich	222
21	What Necromancers Fear	236
22	A Good Denizen	245
23	What Belongs to the Dead	253
24	The Old King	267
25	What Does It Matter?	279
26	The Black Oath	288
27	Chimarvidium	296
28	The Scrywell	309
29	Wasted Opportunities	318
30	Nobody's Business	328

CONTENTS (continued)

31	Emergency Town Meeting	336
32	Faking It	349
33	Affairs in Order	358
34	Flaying and Flying	366
35	Stealing from the Future	378
36	A Fated Death	387
37	What Once Was	393
38	A Worthy Sacrifice	398
	Epilogue	407
	Acknowledgements	411
	Special Thanks	413
	About the Author	415

Drawn by rumours of bounteous dead and macabre knowledge, seven necromancers from all across Ard came to the lost crypt of many kings. At the heart of the crypt, they prepared to battle, each intending to claim it for themselves. But a priestess, Arthura, walked among them.

As they gathered their power, a pillar of red spirits screamed down to consume her, and when it cleared, there was a hole straight through her head, as if the goddess of undeath herself stood before them. ‘Don’t be idiots,’ she said in the yawning voice of Morrin the Undying. ‘This is my city, and I won’t have you ruining it. Play nice.’

The necromancers were awed, so when the goddess left her human vessel whole and unharmed, they only battled a little. Thus was Tombtown first settled.

~from A History of Tombtown by Emberlon the Disloyal



CHAPTER ONE
THE BOY IN THE CRYPT

There was a boy in the crypt, and he wasn't dead. Ree gripped the doorframe, transfixed by the sight of him as he crouched and muttered to himself. Not an adventurer, come to plunder, or an acolyte seeking to disturb the dead, but a boy — curly haired, sepia-skinned, and shockingly, hypnotically alive.

'Rats and rotten luck!' The boy touched the shards of the ceramic jar at his feet. The sound of it shattering had drawn Ree here. He tsked and tutted, sifting through the remnants. 'Oh it's all broken — and over there, look. Drat! It'll take an age to reassemble this.'

Ree had never heard someone with such scattered speech. It made her want to smile — or grimace.

He was in one of the old embalming rooms. Narrow and cold, with rusted tools and dusty jars scattered among the many shelves. A gnarl-legged table stood in the centre, and

beneath the grime and moss, Ree could still make out the dark stains of the grisly work it had once seen.

The boy was lit by a flickering torch he'd propped into one of the sconces. Orange light, shifting and angry, made a monster of his shadow. Nobody Ree knew had need of torchlight. Like Ree, they could see in even pitch black — a ritual her father had done for her when she was first born. One of many small magicks required to live among the dusty dead, far away from sun and sky.

He shouldn't be here. The thought was intrusive, pushing to the fore of her mind again and again. *He shouldn't be here.* Upworlders only came in two kinds: those that would kill her people, and those that would be killed by them. She had no idea which kind he was.

She ought to run. Let the crypt kill him, before he had a chance to kill her. But though her pulse ran fast, her legs wouldn't move. He looked so different to anyone she'd ever known, so bright and vibrant. Utterly misplaced among the crumbling stone and heavy dust.

Someone leaned over Ree's shoulder, drooling and moaning. 'Not now, Larry!' Ree swatted at the undead man trying to gnaw at her shoulder. Some of his flesh flaked off as he backed up, his yellowed eyes rolling in his head. He didn't groan, which was a mercy, but she couldn't completely repress the spike of guilt as he shook his head in confusion, slack jaw lolling.

Inside the room, the boy was still thinking aloud. 'Come now,' he said. 'You're the foremost burial scholar in the Grand University — surely you can identify a few gooey remains without the accompanying script.' His accent was strong and strange to Ree — full of the nasal twang of the

upworlder upper class, much like old Emberlon's, the town archivist and her teacher.

He shouldn't be here; she shouldn't be here. But Ree's curiosity had always been terrible. She eased into the room on soft-soled boots, the split skirt of her dusty robes swishing around her legs. She had a better look at him now — bespectacled, in a plain, fine-clothed shirt and trousers, a much-mauled leather satchel hanging from his shoulder. He might be eighteen or nineteen, only a few years older than her.

He didn't *look* dangerous. Odd, maybe — but then, what was odd to a necromancer's daughter?

He poked gingerly at the jellified organ mulch at his feet. 'Brain!' he said confidently. He drew a journal and pen from his pack and began to scribble.

Ree wrinkled her nose and made a decision. 'That's clearly liver,' she said. The boy yelped and scrambled back along the floor, knocking into the embalming table. A rusty hook fell from the surface and bounced from his shoulder to ping across the stone bricks. The torchlight glittered against his glasses.

The boy rummaged in his pack. 'Stay back, undead creature!' He drew a solid iron sarakat from his pack and held it out as if to ward her off. It was the twisting, tree-shaped religious symbol of some upworlder life god or other. Hard to imagine what protection he hoped to gain from it.

Probably not dangerous. The boy, nor the sarakat.

Ree raised her eyebrows.

The boy lowered the sarakat slightly. 'Pardon me, but ... you are an undead creature, aren't you?'

‘I’m Ree,’ said Ree, because she didn’t know how to respond to ‘you’re an undead creature’.

It was also completely unfair. In a town full of necromancers, she looked the *least* undead. Long exposure to death from life in the crypts had made her skin a bit ashen, and maybe there were dark smudges around her eyes, but as she wasn’t a practitioner, the changes were minor. She noted again his flushed cheeks and bright eyes. Maybe not minor compared to *him*.

Larry stumbled through the doorway.

‘Ah!’ The boy raised his sarakat again. Larry shuffled toward him, arms outstretched. ‘Ah! Get back, you fiend!’

‘*That’s* an undead creature.’ Ree straightened as the boy cowered away. She gave Larry a shove; he toppled, gargling as he went.

The boy scrambled to his feet and sidled to the opposite side of the room, keeping the wall at his back. As if Larry was a ghoul or a sentinel, or any kind of greater undead, instead of a moronic, masterless minion.

The boy’s eyes flicked to Ree. ‘You *pushed* him.’ Larry groaned and flailed, drawing the boy’s gaze once more. ‘Is he alright, do you think?’

Ree’s eyebrows twitched. ‘Barely a breath ago, you called him a fiend.’

‘Yes. Well.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Will he get up again?’

Ree watched Larry kicking his legs like a turtle flipped on its back. ‘Eventually.’ She glanced at the boy; his wide-eyed terror was softening into confusion.

‘Aren’t undead creatures meant to be dangerous?’

Ree shrugged. ‘Most are. Larry isn’t.’

‘Larry?’

Ree crossed her arms, beginning to regret her curiosity. She wasn't used to this much conversation. And certainly not with a stranger. She darkened her expression, hoping to make her discomfort look like power, as her father would. 'Do you have a name?' She asked it as imperiously as she could.

'Uh ... yes, of course. Terribly rude of me — I'm Chandrian Smythe, Third Rank Historian at the Grand University and the foremost burial scholar in the southern reaches.' This formality seemed to have brought him back to himself; he puffed up his chest.

Ree wasn't certain he ought to be proud. She'd not met many scholars before — certainly not those who didn't practice the Craft — but it was hard to be impressed by someone who couldn't tell a jellified brain from a jellified liver. After all, this was a third era embalming room — third era culture ate the brains of their dead to preserve their souls, and embalmed the bodies to preserve the spirit. She'd played with enough embalming jars in her childhood to know there wouldn't be any brains in this sector of crypts.

Ree smoothed her robes and sat down on a heavy urn in the corner. 'What are you doing here?'

The boy, Smythe, blustered a moment. 'I — well, I'm a historian! I'm doing some very important excavation work. I have plenty of reason to be here. The real question is what are *you* doing here?'

He asked it as if he were speaking to another upworlder. Ree's cheeks heated. 'I live here.' She nearly mumbled the words, relieved that her grey-tinged skin wouldn't show her blush.

Larry managed to roll onto his side. He started to gnaw the table leg.

‘You shouldn’t do that, Larry, you’ll ruin what’s left of your teeth.’

‘Live *here*,’ said Smythe.

‘Or hereabouts.’

Smythe took out his journal again. ‘How did you end up here? You must be terribly lonely.’

Ree frowned. ‘Not especially.’ She didn’t completely understand the concept. There had always been plenty of people around, even if they tended to ignore each other. And there were always the dead. Honestly, she spent a large portion of her time travelling so she could get *away* from all of them.

‘Did you run away from home? Or get lost from a — a merchant caravan, perhaps. Festering rats —’ he looked like something awful had just occurred to him. ‘You weren’t abandoned here, were you?’

‘No, of course not.’ Ree glared. She didn’t like the way he was looking at her — like she was equal parts pitiable and fascinating — not unlike the reaction children had to Wandering Larry. Her parents had been among the first settlers of the crypt, and she was proud of her heritage. ‘I was born here.’

There was a moment of silence and indrawn breath broken only by the sound of Larry howling as he chipped a tooth.

Ree sighed and stood up. ‘Look, you really shouldn’t be here. Even if the undead don’t kill you, an adventurer won’t think twice before running you through, and we do seem to get a lot of them. That’s what I came to tell you — that you should leave, and that you won’t find any brains in a third era embalming room. That’s just common sense.’

That, and she'd so badly wanted to see the boy — a living upworlder boy who wouldn't stab her as soon as look at her. Her cheeks heated again, and before Smythe could ask any more questions, she fled into the musty corridor.

'Wait! Where are you going?'

Ree skipped up onto a crate and hauled herself onto a thick wooden crossbeam just as Smythe skidded into the corridor, torch in hand. She crouched above, holding her breath as he looked each way and scratched his head. He picked a direction and started to jog, running beneath her crossbeam and down the corridor, torchlight surrounding him in a flickering orange globe.

Ree put her back to cold stone, breathing deeply. She'd done more than anyone would ask of her. She'd given him a solid warning, and once he realised she was gone, he would surely pack up his things and head back upworld. Given his reaction to Larry, she didn't think he'd have a taste for the night horrors and guardians that wandered the crypts, so it shouldn't take him long to come to his senses.

She swung herself down from the crossbeam and landed lightly on the stone floor. She cringed as she landed, imagining how much better it would be if she were as light as a cat or as graceful as a cave spider. She tracked back down the other side of the corridor and squeezed through a damaged bit of wall that let her into one of the resting rooms, stacked with corpses on stone shelves like children in bunk beds. As she passed, a pale hand reached for her. 'None of that,' she said absently.

She took a pinch of herbs from the pouch at her belt and threw it in the creature's face. The corpse withdrew its hand and stilled. Though she had never desired to learn the Craft and had no power over the dead, she'd learned some

priestess tricks from her mother — such as using the herbs, fluids, and sometimes incense used to prepare corpses to calm lesser undead.

If she had the Craft, like her father, she could turn them with an exertion of will. If she'd been a healer, like her mother, she could destroy them in a pulse of warm light. But she'd not chosen either of her parents' fields, and without magic, the best she could do was trick them into sleep with prayers and plants — and when that failed, flee.

Her thoughts turned again to the upworlder. Smythe had been a bit rude, calling her an undead creature. Not that she didn't get mistaken for one from time to time, but she'd never been called one by someone her own age. By someone who wasn't trying to kill her. She flushed at the thought — that he'd looked at her and mistaken her for a corpse. It was true that denizens tended to look a little greyer and more hollow-eyed than upworlders, but she'd always thought she looked very normal, for a denizen. She was stockier and stronger than anyone she knew — physical fitness being a necessity for life in the crypts without magic. That was a *healthy* look, surely.

'I'm seventeen,' she said to one of the corpses. 'Do I look old and rotten to you?'

It gazed lifelessly at the stone above it. Ree sighed and rubbed her eyes.

It didn't matter what some random boy thought she looked like. Certainly not one so stupid as Smythe. 'Right.' She shook herself and drew a long breath. Smythe was almost certainly gone by now. It was time to collect Larry and head back into the eastern archives, where she'd been sorting books before Smythe had drawn her out. 'Rest well,' she advised the room of corpses. Her father would point out

that her words meant nothing to the dead; her mother would remind her that she owed the dead her respect.

Her eyes lingered on those faces, slack with death, wrapped lovingly centuries before in treated bandages to preserve their physical forms. For those above, the sight of them would elicit fear or disgust, but for Ree there was only a sense of warm familiarity edged with caution. She was not a necromancer like her father and nearly everyone she had ever known. But there was no-one who loved the crypt as she did. None who had explored it as deeply, nor plumbed as many of its secrets. There was no-one who had a stronger claim on it.

And she knew that there was no place here for someone like Chandrian Smythe.

She eased back through the crack in the wall into the previous corridor, smoothed the creases from her robes, and followed the slow, shuffling sound of dragged feet. It wasn't long before she caught sight of the shambling creature, with his cobweb hair and green-tinged skin. 'Larry,' she called. She snapped her fingers.

Larry turned ponderously, arms swinging like pendulums, and shuffled toward Ree, drool pooling at the corners of his lolling mouth.

They called him Wandering Larry, though who had first named him, Ree didn't know. He was an anomaly, a minion without a master, but he was a harmless one. He'd been here before the town was founded, bumbling after this person or that, pathetically failing in his attempts to eat people. As the first child born in the crypt, Ree had grown up with him. She was equal parts fond of him and frustrated by him, like an old, smelly, family dog.

Now that he'd caught her scent again, he would reliably follow her back to town. She set off down the corridor, up a spindly staircase and up a crumbling stone wall, trailed by the putrescent Larry. It felt good to be moving again; it loosened something in her brain, as if her thoughts had been lodged by a hard rock and could now flow freely.

At times like this, she usually thought about her personal research. This place in her mind — and in her journal, tucked safely in her pack — was solely for her. It was as much a promise as a comfort. One day, when her research was complete, everyone would be forced to acknowledge her power. They would be more polite when they asked her to fetch books *then*.

And yet the river of her thoughts kept winding back over and over to the moment she revealed herself. '*Pardon me, but ... you are an undead creature, aren't you?*'

Ree gritted her teeth. She dropped from a ledge into a shallow pit, old bones crunching under her feet. She stepped aside just as Larry landed on his face, flailing among the bones. Ree sighed and flicked a knucklebone from her collar. 'It's more than a little insulting,' she murmured. While Larry struggled, she pulled herself up on the other side.

She tried to think of herself as other people saw her. Stocky build, sickly skin, shadowed brown eyes, and with dark hair pinned and trapped beneath her hood. Unremarkable among the denizens. Maybe unremarkable anywhere.

She'd never put much thought into her appearance. It wasn't like people spent a lot of time *looking* at her. And on the rare occasion she attracted a snide comment, it had slipped from her mind without care. But it was different this

time. She would grit her teeth and force her mind to other things, and yet it still kept circling back. The look of horror on his face ...

They carried on their journey upwards, across a rattling bridge and along the side of a steep black ravine. ‘Think about it, Larry. It’s not like I march into people’s homes and compare them to apes or goblins. I bet when you were alive, you wouldn’t have put up with that.’

Larry gargled at her and tried to bite her arm. She shook him off with an admonishing tap on his forehead. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ Ree turned the corner. ‘I don’t care —’

Ree froze midstep, panic seizing her muscles as surely as a healer’s spell. Cold pierced her like an arctic wind. Her gaze locked with white marble eyes in a translucent-skinned face, mere feet from her own. Horror clung to Ree like sweat.

She reached for her father’s training, for the mental wards that would protect her, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from its pale gaze and already she could feel herself disappearing into it as if caught in a blizzard.

The Lich leaned closer. It was a pale, man-like thing that hovered an inch above the ground, robes swirling like tentacles. Its breath rattled through peeled-back lips and its long-nailed fingers reached for her, slowly.

There was only one being in the crypt with such tangible, arresting power. It had been a necromancer, once. So old and so far-gone into the Craft that it had forgotten how to be human. It was the biggest monster of the crypts, but also its most powerful protector — so long as nobody crossed its path.

Ree’s chest squeezed. She leaned away from the Lich, torn between the danger of getting caught and the danger

of running. A lifetime of her parents' warnings drummed in her mind, a constant litany of *'Don't get caught. Don't let it see. Do not disturb the dead.'*

And now, just as they'd always warned, she could feel the air grow heavy with tiredness as its magic pooled around her. Her eyelids drooped, her body sagged.

It spread its arms wide. *'Imaz kwizzat?'* it whispered, with magic as dry as parchment. *'Kwizzat erd vizzin?'*

Its power pressed on her, leeching energy from body and mind. She felt exhausted by it all; by her life in the catacombs, by her fear of the Lich, the constant twitchy thoughts of whether to run or hide. It would be so much easier to give in ...

'Don't close your eyes. Don't fall asleep. Don't forget you're alive.'

Its arms started to close around her, a cold embrace with the overpowering smell of dust. She heard it chanting the words of binding even as its magic drained the life from her and let it bleed into the stone. It was just so very hard to care ...

'I say, Ree, is that a friend of yours?'

Smythe's cultured, upworlder accent shocked Ree out of her stupor. She reeled back, even as the Lich whirled and glided toward this new intruder, death magic trailing it like red mist.

'Run!' Ree shouted, but her tongue was thick and sluggish.

'Wha —?' Smythe froze as the Lich rose up in front of him, the tatters of its robes swirling about it in slow motion as if underwater.

Adrenaline surged; Ree leapt for Smythe, but the Lich was already sliding one withered hand under his chin.

Smythe stared into its marble eyes. ‘I — I beg your —’
‘*Erd.*’ The word curled in the air. Smythe’s eyes rolled up into his head and he collapsed to the floor.

The Lich started chanting; Ree snatched at Smythe’s hands, steeling her mind to the Lich’s cloying necromancy. The Lich reached for her and its magic pressed down on her, a suffocating force. As lethargy set in, she savagely bit her lip; pain seared as hot blood poured down her chin, reminding her she was alive.

She tried to drag Smythe away but he was heavy, made all the more so with the Lich’s eyes on them. She just needed a moment, just to get Smythe out of its sight ...

Larry shambled in, groaning forlornly. The Lich’s back straightened; its nostrils flared. It turned slowly on the spot to face Larry.

Its magic faded along with its attention. Ree seized her moment. She grabbed Smythe, cursing him for his considerable weight even as she fought the tail of the Lich’s lethargy. She dragged him behind a stack of crates, her pulse pounding in her throat. Escape routes flashed through her mind: the drainage tunnel at the back, the trap door beneath the southern wall, but she could take advantage of none of these without abandoning Smythe, who was even now rapidly paling, his skin growing as clammy as a corpse.

She ought to leave him. What was he to her, really, this boy from the world above?

This boy who had saved her life.

When the Lich turned back from Larry to find his quarries missing, Ree held her breath. His white marble eyes swept the room, and Ree pressed further back behind the crate. Then, the energy in the room eased; the Lich folded its magic back into itself. It hunched in, and the light

in its eyes died. It crooked a finger at Larry, almost an invitation, but the minion only gawped at it. Its arm dropped; it glided from the room as if nothing had ever happened.

Ree peered out from behind the box, her entire body tensed to flee. Larry spotted her, gargled what might have been delight, and tottered toward her. Ree slumped in relief.

Larry bumped into her shoulder and she patted his leg fondly. ‘You did well, Larry.’

He tried to nibble her hair, and she swatted him away.

Though the immediate danger had passed, it was hard to let the tension from her body. They had come so close to a fate worse than death; to be a minion of an immortal Lich, forever enslaved.

She had lived under the threat of the Lich for as long as she could remember. How many times had she watched it from afar as it searched through the archives or chanted its rituals? It had always seemed to her some kind of sinister automaton, but its danger had felt contained, its threat unreal. It lived its life on rails, unaware of anything that didn’t directly interrupt it. She’d been taught its schedule, where to avoid and when. It had become familiar. She had almost felt fond of it.

Now, she trembled from the memory of its magic. Larry touched her head with his clammy hands, groaning piteously. Bizarre to think that if he’d been following anyone else today, Ree would now be dead — or undead.

Her gaze fell on Smythe. His chest barely rose and all colour had drained from his face. ‘And what am I supposed to do with you?’ Ree murmured. Larry leaned around her, drool dangling from his open mouth. ‘Okay, Larry, I need you to — no, don’t chew on him! Just hold still ...’

The denizens of Tombtown were loathe to chain themselves with rules and regulations. In those early days, they agreed on only one: no outsiders, unless they were fellow necromancers. They had all been ill-used by those of the world above, and intended the crypt to be their sanctuary. But six years after founding, that law would be put to the test when a healer of considerable power descended into the crypt.

After disintegrating the defending minions with a single fell blast of magic like sunlight, she put her lone hand on her hip. ‘I’m building a house. Don’t bother me.’

The necromancers were awed, so when the healer settled in their town, they only bothered her a little. The law was given a very small addendum: no outsiders, unless they were fellow necromancers — or otherwise too powerful to chase out.

If there is one thing all necromancers can be trusted to respect, it is power.

~from A History of Tombtown by Emberlon the Disloyal



CHAPTER TWO
THE TOWN HEALERS

Girl and minion dragged Smythe's limp body through dusty tunnels and crumbling halls, right into the heart of the town: the central mausoleum. There, winding between tombhomes and with a worried eye over her shoulder, Ree smuggled Smythe into her house without catching the attention of curious necromancers. She was still panting from the effort, her hair plastered to her forehead.

Now, she stood before the tall, wan form of one of the only other non-practitioners in town, not quite meeting her eyes.

'You've brought home a dying man? Such a dutiful daughter.' Ree's mother's lips quirked, the iciness in her eyes melting minutely. She stalked around the body sprawled across her kitchen table, darting gaze taking in the colour in his skin, the healthy fullness of his cheeks. Her fur

cloak flared as she walked; her cassock scritch along the floor.

They stood in the family tombhome, a repurposed small stone tomb that her family had lived in since the town had first been settled some nineteen years earlier. With exposed stone-brick walls, scratched marble floors, and aged furniture padded with limp cushions, it had a certain ‘small-town cemetery’ charm — and gravemould smell. The uncluttered serenity of home.

Ree squared her shoulders, trying to push away the discomfort she always felt when her mother went into priestess-mode. While her father was on the town council and so deep into the Craft that he barely looked human anymore, he was a steady and predictable force in her life — if not always a positive one. Her mother, though, with her brittle mane of ash blonde hair, the eyes of a fanatic, and a manner that shifted between eerie priestess and hard-hearted huntress, was something else entirely. Ree trusted her mother, but she never knew quite what to expect from her. Such was the trouble of a mother who was also the Priestess of Morrin the Undying.

Ree took a deep breath while her mother peeled Smythe’s eyelids back and peered into his rolled-back eyes. ‘Mother, I need —’

‘What twist of fate led you to an upworlder boy? No — nevermind. I know better than to question what Morrin provides. You can help me with the burial rights — the goddess prefers them with a little life left.’ She pinched Smythe’s wrist to take his pulse, then let it fall again. Smythe’s lips moved, mumbling unintelligibly.

Ree’s stomach lurched with something between hope and dismay. ‘He’s not for sacrifice, he’s —’

Ree's mother cupped her cheek, the rough cloth of her cassock sleeve scratching her skin. Ree jumped at her touch; an unexpected show of affection. 'We'll have to move quickly if we're to get him to the Altar of Many Gods before your father returns.'

Smythe moaned something that sounded a little like 'fascinating', his head turning.

'*Mother.*' Ree mimicked her father's tone of command, wishing she could imitate the crack of power that went with it. She couldn't quite suppress a sigh when her mother stopped, her head tilting to one side. She was so tired of being spoken over, even within her own family. 'I intend to save him,' she said.

Her mother's eyebrows lifted. 'Save *him*,' she repeated. The disbelief in her voice encompassed a hundred questions.

'I owe him.' Ree rubbed her eyes. 'Look, it's ... sort of a long story.' And if she revealed the Lich's part in it, she would be in a world of trouble. The town council forbade interacting with the Lich, for fear that it might follow someone back to the town. 'Can you heal him?'

Her mother clasped her hands in front of her. 'There's no shame or dishonour in letting the dead pass, Reanima.' Her voice was gentle, reassuring, but Ree wouldn't meet her eyes. 'It is the natural order of the world. The living die, and their souls pass into the keeping of the gods. The bodies are exalted and put to service of the living. You may not practice, like your father, but you know it's true.'

She wanted to snap at her mother that she could make up her own mind. That Smythe wasn't dead yet, and Morrin was welcome to him when he was. But an argument would get her no closer to saving him, so she stored it away in the

black pit in her chest where she kept all her resentments. 'Can you heal him?' she repeated, as evenly as she could.

Ree's mother pursed her lips. 'Possibly. But the town council will be furious if they hear. Did anyone see you bring him?'

Ree shook her head. She'd used all her knowledge of secret pathways to get him into town unnoticed.

Ree's mother shrugged off her patchy fur cloak and rolled up the voluminous sleeves of her brown cassock. She hovered her hands over him, closing her eyes; white light shone through her skin and limned Smythe where he lay. Warmth pulsed from her in a heartbeat rhythm.

Even under a death curse, Smythe looked out of place in Ree's home. The old stone walls of what had once been a small tomb were cold and dull, the marble floor carpeted not in fabric but in straw and moss and hardy cave mushrooms. Bricks had been pulled from the walls in places, and filled with pottery and urns taken from the surrounding tombs. Once great treasures or works of art, now they held food or trinkets, the odds and ends of daily life. The furniture, largely made of reclaimed crate wood or scavenged from embalming rooms, was old and rickety, and frequently scattered with knuckle bones or femurs, such as Ree's father required for his Craft.

Amongst the grey and green, and the flickering light cast by the tallow candles, Smythe looked altogether too alive, jarringly vibrant amongst the gloom.

Ree's mother's eyebrows pinched together. 'This is no normal curse. It's knit deep into him, hooked into his bones. Do you know what cursed him?'

Ree crossed her arms. She didn't want to tell her mother about the encounter with the Lich if she could possibly

avoid it. The town council would be nothing compared to the fear and anger of her worried parents. That she had been so foolish as to walk directly into his path was bad enough; that she had dragged this idiot with her was beyond careless.

Her mother took her silence for uncertainty. ‘It must have been a greater dead, at least. Maybe even a greywraith.’ Her lips pursed. She’d named a minion so powerful that few could summon one — a creature of rags and grey flesh, only half-corporeal. The essence of a body, pure and dangerous, with none of the physical drawbacks of a minion like Larry. But nothing compared to the Lich.

The trouble Ree would be in if her parents found out she’d crossed the Lich didn’t bear thinking about. They’d try to force her into learning the Craft, and that didn’t suit Ree at all. Once you started using a school of magic — necromancy or healing — you were locked in. And Ree had other plans.

Her thoughts flickered uneasily, torn between the boy she owed and her determination to continue her study at all costs.

Ree’s mother turned from Smythe and considered her daughter. ‘How much do you like this boy?’

Ree shuffled her feet, She didn’t like where this was going. ‘I just met him.’

The light faded from Ree’s mother, gradually returning her to her wan, haggard self. Her eyes were solemn as she considered her daughter. ‘I haven’t the skill to save him. He’ll die on this table before the day is out. We could take him to Andomerys ...’ She trailed off, but Ree knew where the sentence ended.

They could take him to Andomerys, but then the whole town would know. And that was dangerous in an entirely different way.

If Andomerys even agreed to save him.

Ree's mother wasn't concerned about the danger to Smythe. She was only thinking of the trouble it would mean for Ree. Ree would have to face the wrath of the town council, and she'd always gone out of her way to avoid their ire.

There were very few rules that a town full of necromancers would agree on, but Ree had broken the only one that mattered: no outsiders allowed. If the upworlders found out about Tombtown, it would bring disaster (or worse, *priests*) down on all their heads.

It would be a blow for her. Another reason for her parents to claim she was helpless and the council to call her clueless, an outsider in her own town. They might finally force her to learn the Craft, as they had been threatening for years, as if being a practitioner would somehow give her better judgement.

And of course they would kill Smythe.

She looked at Smythe, greying and shallow-breathed. He might not even live. What did it matter that he'd taken a curse meant for her? It would be a mercy to die quietly now, before the council got their claws into him.

Ree scowled and scrubbed at her face. 'We'll use the back stairs,' she said.

Her mother canted her head to one side, as if Ree had surprised her. Ree shrugged off her scrutiny.

Smythe was all arms and legs as they bundled him out the door and dragged him up the back stairs, no doubt adding

several back-bruises to whatever lumps and bumps he'd received when Ree and Larry first hauled him into town.

'Morrin's teeth! He's gangly as a spider.' Ree's mother puffed with the effort of carrying him.

Smythe's back hit another step; he grunted, and mumbled, 'foremost burial scholar at the biggest ...' He trailed off into incoherence.

Ree's mother wrinkled her nose. 'Urgh. There's no shame in letting him pass beyond, Ree. He'll be welcomed into Her court.'

'Mother.'

Her mother made a snorting sound that Ree interpreted as 'you can stop using that tone on me', but they eventually heaved him up the final flight of moss-strewn steps and laid him in front of the door of a crumbling wooden shack — the only true 'house' in the whole town.

There was a story behind its construction. There was a story for almost every house in the town, of course, and Ree had been present for most of them. But though this wooden shack was an intimidating replica of upworld society, Ree was much more interested in the woman who had built it.

Ree scanned the town behind them, stretching below in a honeycomb of repurposed tombs and altars. Robed figures milled about the town square, and a cabal oversaw a small horde of minions at the northern passage, but there was nobody close enough to question why Ree and her mother were dragging around a body that was still breathing.

'Andomerys!' Ree's mother rapped on the door. 'My daughter requires your assistance. Perhaps for once, you will not shirk your sacred calling!'

Ree nudged her mother. 'Maybe don't antagonise her, since we're asking her for help?'

‘The Goddess asks us to live as honestly in life as we will in death.’ Ree’s mother sniffed.

Andomerys yanked the door open. Her rosy cheeks glowed with health, her skin a warm brown. Her thickly curled hair made a dark halo about her head. One arm ended at the elbow. She wore robes of ocean blue, and though Ree had known her since she was a small child, it never stopped being shocking how vital and bright she appeared. Her scowl, however, was plenty dark. ‘Arthura. Ree.’ She looked down. ‘A body.’ She nodded, as if confirming something to herself, and slammed the door in their faces.

Ree’s mother immediately banged on the door again. ‘You *dare* slam a door in the face of Morrin’s chosen?’

A muffled bark of laughter was her only answer.

‘Mother —’

‘Morrin as my witness, you *will* show me respect —’

‘Mother!’ Ree tugged sharply at her mother’s sleeve.

The priestess stopped and blinked at her, the red rage fading from her eyes. Healers rarely looked as necromantic as Ree’s mother — but then, few were also priestesses of undeath.

‘I can handle this,’ said Ree. ‘Go home.’

Her mother’s gaze shifted from her, to Andomerys’ door, then back again. Her lips parted, as if to argue, but she only inclined her head and swept away.

Leaving Ree on Andomerys’ doorstep with a dying man at her feet and no clue how to gain the healer’s help.

Andomerys was the most powerful healer Ree had ever heard of, with reserves of magic so deep that she had passed into legend. But thirteen years ago, she’d fled the surface and made it clear that she was leaving healing behind.

Townfolk came to her with everything from cursed hearts to broken limbs, but she turned almost everyone away.

Ree did not consider herself a persuasive person. But the stakes were high. She liked Andomerys; maybe Andomerys liked her too. She could only hope it would be enough.

She leaned against the door. ‘Andomerys?’

No answer.

‘It’s just me. I sent mother away.’ She paused a moment, then continued, ‘You’re probably at least a *little* curious as to how I came across an upworlder.’

Footsteps. The door creaked open. ‘You finally went to the surface on your own?’

Andomerys had encouraged her, over the years, to seek companionship in the upworld. ‘*There’s a world of opportunity up there, for a smart girl with her wits about her.*’ she’d said. ‘*You wouldn’t have to be the bottom of the heap then.*’

‘*I won’t always be the bottom.*’ Ree’s tone had been conspiratorial. ‘*There are other kinds of power —*’

‘*Ugh.*’

‘*Well, it’s not like you liked it up there either.*’

Andomerys’ eyes had grown distant. ‘*I liked it plenty. Nobody chooses to hide away, Ree. Not even necromancers.*’

Now, Ree grimaced at the healer. ‘Of course I didn’t. But I did talk to him a little. He seems ... different.’

Andomerys’ expression didn’t flicker. ‘Different.’

Ree shifted her weight. ‘... Nice.’ She paused. ‘He saved my life. Please, Andomerys.’

‘I won’t heal him.’

‘Will you at least look at him?’ She looked down at Smythe, muttering at her feet. The curse was slowly leeching the colour from his skin. He looked faded, like a

painting left too long in the sun. It was an effect she'd found fascinating on her excursions to the surface with her father for supplies, but it was disconcerting on a human. 'I don't even know whether he *could* be saved.'

'Ree ...' They locked gazes, blue eyes meeting brown. Andomerys made a sound like a cat guarding its dinner. 'I'll look, all right? Just look.'

Hope bloomed in Ree, strong enough to choke. 'Thank you.'

'I don't need your thanks.' Andomerys looked away. 'I doubt I'll do anything to deserve it.'

The seven founding necromancers set themselves up as a town council to settle disputes among the denizens and to intimidate unruly necromancers into obedience. As necromancers naturally form into cabals under more powerful practitioners, this shape of governance worked with little rebellion.

As of the time of writing, only three of the seven founding council members have been executed for treason and mutiny.

This success is much celebrated, and at solstices, the tortured souls of the offending council members are summoned to warn young denizens of the dangers of trying to grab too much power. It is a delightful tradition and a favourite of children.

~from A History of Tombtown by Emberlon the Disloyal



CHAPTER THREE
STRONG-WILLED INDEED

Andomerys' house was like the woman herself: full of bright draperies and busy carpets, an explosion of colour that Ree found eye-watering but wonderful. Cushions and blankets were cast about, each crafted from old but expensive fabric that was soft to the skin and gleamed in the candlelight. Clear relics from her life on the surface.

Now, that same woman hustled Ree, begrudgingly, through her house.

'Through the back, through the back — and try not to drop him!' The healer used her hand and arms to help manoeuvre Smythe around her armchair.

Ree had seen the back room a few times before that she could remember — once, when she had crushed her leg when the floor in one of the towers collapsed, and once when she'd accidentally awakened a slumbering knight and he'd cut her across the middle. Andomerys had broken her

no-healing rule to save a child. It looked just as it had then — white stone walls and a meticulously clean steel table, with a cabinet of cruel-looking tools to one side. Ree wondered what it said about Andomerys that she had come here to give up healing, but had built a healer's room and filled it with equipment.

‘Not a delicately built fellow, is he?’ said Andomerys.

‘Very important discoveries,’ Smythe mumbled. ‘You must take me serious-largh ...’

Ree narrowed her eyes at him. Somehow, he couldn't stop talking even when unconscious. ‘Humble, too.’

They hustled Smythe onto the healer's table. His head lolled at the movement. Andomerys looked him over, hovering her hand and her short arm over the patient. Now, a golden light suffused her, just as it had Ree's mother, but Andomerys' light was brighter, warmer, transforming the sterile stone cube into a sunroom. Ree gritted her teeth against the force of it. The heat was slick and humid against her skin.

‘A powerful curse.’ Andomerys' gaze flicked up to Ree, as if she knew Ree had had something to do with it. ‘If it had been completed, I doubt he'd have lasted this long.’

‘But?’

The light around Andomerys pulsed, then faded. ‘He's resisting. He must have a strong will indeed.’

Smythe's head whipped to the other side. ‘I demand to speak to your superior,’ he mumbled.

Andomerys raised her eyebrows. ‘Or maybe just a strong ego.’

Ree's eyes widened and she looked at Smythe uncertainly. ‘Strong-willed’ seemed a poor description of

the bumbling scholar. Perhaps he had hidden depths. She bit her lip. Very hidden.

‘So.’ Andomerys leaned against the healing table. ‘You tangled with the Lich.’

Ree’s mouth dried. If the healer told Ree’s parents or the town council, it would mean more trouble for Ree than just an upworlder could bring. Bringing an upworlder home would make her look foolish. Angering the Lich would make her a liability — and necromancers tended to kill those pretty quickly. With effort, she nodded, her thoughts racing for an explanation.

Andomerys cursed and rubbed her eyes. ‘Don’t look at me like I’m your executioner, young Ree. I won’t tell if I don’t have to, but I know the Lich’s work when I see it. You understand?’

Ree nodded. Andomerys would only tell if Ree had upset the balance — if encountering the Lich had somehow woken it up and drawn it back to the town.

Do not disturb the dead, her parents always told her. It was her one true rule, a mantra never to be forgotten. It was why she kept a pouch of herbs on her belt, her mother’s prayers on her lips, and an amulet full of her father’s magic against her heart. All the denizens of Tombtown put together couldn’t hope to stand against the Lich if it woke up the entire crypt and brought judgement down upon them. This was their home, but it belonged first and last to the dead. She must never forget that.

If she'd started learning the Craft at sixteen, as the other teenage denizens did, and as her father urged, she might not have to be so wary. But her sixteenth birthday had come and gone, and then her seventeenth, and now her father could barely look at her, and her mother thought her odd.

But there were other kinds of power. Forgotten magicks so old that they'd passed into myth. She thought of her research journal, hidden away where nobody would ever find it, and drew some strength from it.

But if she'd learned the Craft like her parents wanted, she might have been able to protect Smythe, at least a little ...

Andomerys narrowed her eyes. 'Take that hangdog look outside. I need a moment to study him properly — so I can send you in the right direction, if there's help to be had. *Not* to heal him myself.' She waved Ree away, crushing the spike of hope her words had created.

So Ree sat on the crumbling step in front of Andomerys' house and rested her chin in her hands. Her mind was on Smythe, crouching over shattered ceramics, lying cold and grey on Andomerys' table. She thought about his shock on meeting her, about him following her into the Lich's path, about Andomerys' words, *'He must have a strong will indeed.'*

How strong-willed did you have to be to resist a curse from something more powerful than all the denizens put together?

Down below, a group of young acolytes about her age had dragged in a wolf carcass and were setting up a ritual to raise it. Across from them, Mazerin the Bold, a weedy little necromancer, had set up his weekly Bone Market stall and was trying to coax the acolytes into buying some of his fresh scry-bones. It all looked so normal, such a sleepy, small-town scene, that it might have sent Ree off into the deepest, unexplored levels of the crypt just to bring some excitement into her life. But right now, Ree didn't feel normal. Bees buzzed in her head and anxiety pecked at her belly like angry birds.

She'd never had much cause to worry about other people. Larry was already dead, her parents were as dangerous as anything else in the crypts, and Emberlon was as careful as she was. In truth, she'd always lived in a world where people were worried for *her*.

In Smythe's case, she couldn't decide whether she was worried for him, or worried what he might cause. But for better or worse, she'd brought an upworlder into the town. Now, all she could do was wait.

She fished in her pack for something to occupy her twitchy hands. First, a piece of rat jerky, salty and hard between her teeth. Then her research journal, which she dared not get out in plain sight, full of animal sketches and half-drawn spell diagrams. Instead, she pulled out book she'd been collecting for Uzma Plaguebringer, a denizen with a special interest in animal minions. She leafed through it, liking the feel of the heavy parchment between her fingers. Most of it was written in old Antherian, a language dead to any but necromancers, who used it in their Craft. Ree was fluent enough, but all the talk of necromancy made her eyes roll back in her head. She returned it to her pack just as the door behind her creaked open.

She leapt to her feet. 'Andomerys!'

The healer frowned. She looked more worn than Ree had ever seen her, though her skin almost glowed, as if she were still casting now. Healing magic kept its practitioners young; Ree wondered again how old Andomerys really was. 'It doesn't look good.'

Ree swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

'I can stop the curse spreading, and stop it killing his body, but it's wrapped around his soul as well, and I know very little about that. The soul is traditionally the concern

of necromancers, not healers.’ Her eyes were hard, as if steeling herself against her own words. ‘He’s not conscious, and not likely to become it. If I remove my magic from him, he’ll die.’

Ree nodded, but the situation called for words. She cleared her throat and said quietly, ‘He saved my life.’ She’d meant to say that she understood, but the words had come pushing out. It was at the front of her mind — that he’d come *looking* for her, that if he hadn’t, she would have been cursed and probably dead.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Andomerys. ‘There *were* healers who could heal souls. Or so history tells us. But I haven’t the knowledge.’ She paused. ‘Would you like to say goodbye?’

Ree nodded but something in the healer’s words had caught in her mind. ‘Or so history tells us ...’ she murmured, halfway through the door. She stopped with her hand on the doorframe.

‘Ree?’

Ree’s eyes lifted to meet hers. Shadowed versus bright. ‘Could you learn it from a book?’

Andomerys frowned. ‘If there was such a book.’

Ree nodded to herself. Several of the libraries had healing books in their magic collections — some of them very, very old. ‘Keep him alive for a few days,’ said Ree. ‘If there is such a book, I know how to find it.’

‘Ree —’

Ree hurried down the steps.

Andomerys grunted in frustration. ‘I didn’t come to this crypt to be a healer!’ she shouted.

No. But she was *still* a healer.

‘I’ll be back soon! A few days, at most!’ Ree called.

‘Days?!’

Ree ran down another flight of stairs and into the complex of tombhomes. She wound past lumbering minions carrying boxes and tools for their masters, leapt over the wolf the young acolytes had just got twitching, and shouldered past Etherea Eversworn in her high brocade collar and lace veil, who threatened to curse her shoes. She skidded to a halt in a small alley to knock loudly on a salvage-wood door. It creaked open.

‘Emberlon.’ Ree looked at her mentor and ducked her head in a reflexive bow that she never seemed to be able to shake. ‘I need your help.’

Emberlon drew the door wider. ‘Best come inside.’